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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000517

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: SENIOR SYRIAN DISSIDENT ON THE OPPOSITION, THE
SITUATION IN LEBANON

REF: DAMASCUS 0500

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL CORBIN, PER 1.4 B,D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: SENIOR OPPOSITION FIGURE RIAD TURK TOLD A/DCM MAY 22 THAT HE REMAINS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE OPPOSITION IN SYRIA, DESPITE ITS CURRENT WEAKNESS. WHILE CRITICAL OF SOME OF THE TACTICAL DECISIONS AND CAUTION OF FELLOW DISSIDENT RIAD SEIF (PARTICULAR REGARDING CALLS TO BOYCOTT THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM) , TURK IS LARGELY SUPPORTIVE OF SEIF'S EFFORTS AND SEES HIM AS A UNITING FIGURE THAT CAN EXPAND THE SIZE OF THE OPPOSITION IN SYRIA. TURK CALLED FOR SUSTAINED INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE ON THE ASAD REGIME TO FREE SYRIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS SUCH AS KAMAL LABWANI AND MICHEL KILO. TURK ASSESSED THAT THE ASAD REGIME REMAINS FEARFUL ABOUT THE LEBANON TRIBUNAL, A REALITY THAT EXPLAINS THE SUDDEN EMERGENCE OF FATAH AL-ISLAM, WHOSE MEMBERS TURK DESCRIBED AS "AGENTS OF THE SYRIAN REGIME." HE DISMISSED THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM AS A SHAM DESIGNED TO SEND THE MESSAGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT BASHAR IS LOVED BY HIS PEOPLE. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) OPTIMISM DESPITE OPPOSITION'S WEAKNESS: SENIOR DISSIDENT RIAD TURK TOLD A/DCM MAY 22 THAT HE REMAINS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE STATE OF THE OPPOSITION IN SYRIA, DESPITE WHAT HE ACKNOWLEDGED AS ITS WEAKNESSES AND BASHAR AL-ASAD'S THEN IMMINENT RE-ELECTION TO A SECOND SEVEN-YEAR TERM AS PRESIDENT. IN HIS VIEW CHANGE COULD COME AS SUDDENLY HERE IN SYRIA AS IT DID IN EASTERN EUROPE WHEN THE SOVIET EMPIRE BEGAN TO WEAKEN OR IN LEBANON AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF RAFIK HARIRI, WHEN SYRIAN TROOPS WERE WITHDRAWN IN A MATTER OF MONTHS. IN THOSE PLACES ALSO, THE OPPOSITION HAD BEEN WEAK, TURK NOTED, BUT BIG CHANGES HAD TAKEN PLACE. TURK UNDERLINED THAT THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION NEEDED SUPPORT AND EXPRESSIONS OF SOLIDARITY FROM THE U.S., EUROPE, AND "THE ARABS."

13. (C) TAKING RIAD SEIF'S MEASURE: TURK AND FELLOW FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER AMIN MARDINI (WHO SAT IN ON THE MEETING WITH A/DCM) DESCRIBED AS OVERLY CAUTIOUS SOME OF THE STANDS OF FELLOW DISSIDENT RIAD SEIF, SUCH AS THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP'S DECISION TO "BOYCOTT THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM" BUT NOT TO CALL FOR A GENERAL VOTING BOYCOTT BY SYRIAN CITIZENS (THE POSITION ADOPTED BY TURK AND THE SMALL WING OF THE SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY HE LEADS). HOWEVER TURK ACKNOWLEDGED SEIF'S IMPORTANCE TO THE OPPOSITION AND RECOGNIZED SEIF'S LEADERSHIP OF THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION (DD) GROUP AS CENTRAL TO THE FUTURE OF THE OPPOSITION IN SYRIA.

14. (C) SEIF HAD THE POTENTIAL TO ATTRACT SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS

OF NEW MEMBERS INTO THE OPPOSITION, PEOPLE WITH LOCAL CLOUT OR PROMINENCE IN TRIBES, ETHNIC GROUPS, OR MINORITIES, AS HE WAS DOING WITH HIS EFFORTS TO EXPAND THE DD GROUP INTO A NATIONAL CONGRESS, RANGING FROM LIBERALS TO MODERATE ISLAMISTS, INSISTED TURK. HE EXPLAINED THAT SEIF'S CAUTION IS LARGELY A RESULT OF THE IDEOLOGICAL CROSS-CURRENTS HE IS NAVIGATING INSIDE THE DIVERSE DD GROUP, WHICH INCLUDES PAN-ARAB NASSERISTS, LEFTISTS, MODERATE ISLAMISTS AND KURDS, AMONG OTHERS. FEAR OF REGIME REPRISALS AGAINST DD MEMBERS HAS ALSO COMPELLED SEIF TO EXERCISE RESTRAINT ABOUT THE GROUP'S PUBLIC STANDS TO SOME DEGREE, NOTED TURK AND MARDINI.

15. (C) CALLS FOR PRESSURE ON REGIME TO RELEASE PRISONERS: TURK CALLED FOR SUSTAINED INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE ON THE ASAD REGIME TO FREE SYRIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS SUCH AS KAMAL LABWANI AND MICHEL KILO. WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THAT SUCH PRESSURE WOULD NOT LEAD TO IMMEDIATE RESULTS, IT COULD AT LEAST HELP PREVENT WORSE REPRESSION IN THE SHORT TERM, AND COULD YIELD RESULTS LATER ON. TURK INSISTED THAT A THREE-YEAR PRISON TERM METED OUT TO HIM IN 2001 HAD BEEN CUT IN HALF BECAUSE OF INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE, ESPECIALLY FROM THE FRENCH. AMONG OTHER ACTIONS, TURK CALLED FOR BRINGING SYRIA BEFORE THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS. TURK ALSO DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS AN ADVOCATE OF CONTINUOUS PUBLIC PRESSURE ON THE SARG, INSISTING THAT IT ONLY RESPONDED TO SUSTAINED, CONVINCING PRESSURE. HE DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS SATISFIED WITH RECENT USG STATEMENTS ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SYRIA, BUT RE-EMPHASIZED THAT SUCH PRESSURE MUST BE SUSTAINED AND CONTINUOUS.

16. (C) ASSESSING REGIME FEARS OVER TRIBUNAL: TURK ASSESSED THAT THE ASAD REGIME REMAINS FEARFUL ABOUT THE LEBANON TRIBUNAL AND WARY ABOUT THE EVIDENCE THAT UNIIIC INVESTIGATOR SERGE BRAMMERTZ HAS AMASSED. THE REGIME "WANTS A DEAL" WITH

KEY PARTIES -- THE UN, THE U.S., THE FRENCH, AND THE SAUDIS -- THAT WILL ALLOW KEY REGIME FIGURES TO "AVOID THE WORST CONSEQUENCES" OF THE TRIBUNAL. THEY DO NOT WANT ANY SYRIAN SUMMONED ABROAD FOR QUESTIONING OR TRIAL, FEARING REVELATIONS THAT MIGHT BE MADE, SAID TURK. TURK SAID THESE FEARS HELP EXPLAIN WHAT HE VIEWED AS THE SYRIA-ENGINEERED CRISIS IN LEBANON, AND THE SUDDEN ERUPTION OF FIGHTING BY FATAH AL-ISLAM, WHOSE MEMBERS TURK DESCRIBED AS "AGENTS OF THE SYRIAN REGIME" IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. (TURKS COMMENTS ON FATAH AL-ISLAM REPORTED REFTTEL.) IN ADVANCE OF THE HIGHLY PUBLICIZED WEEKEND AIRLIFT OF U.S. AMMUNITION AND EQUIPMENT TO THE LEBANESE ARMY, TURK CALLED FOR STEADY, VIGOROUS INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR LEBANON, THE LEBANESE ARMY, AND THE GOVERNMENT OF SINIORA AS THEY CONFRONTED "THESE TERRORISTS" FROM FATAH AL-ISLAM. AT THE SAME TIME, TURK CALLED FOR THE U.S. TO STOP THE BOYCOTT OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY AND (SPEAKING BEFORE A QASSAM ROCKET KILLED AN ISRAELI CITIZEN IN SDEROT MAY 27) TO PRESSURE ISRAEL TO STOP THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN AGAINST GAZA. BOTH ACTIONS WOULD SHORE UP THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT AS IT MOVED TOWARDS CONFRONTING FATAH AL-ISLAM, SAID TURK.

17. (C) SPEAKING DAYS BEFORE THE VOTING IN THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM, TURK DISMISSED THE EXERCISE AS A PRIMITIVE, ANTI-DEMOCRATIC SHAM DESIGNED TO SEND THE MESSAGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT BASHAR IS LOVED BY HIS PEOPLE.

CORBIN